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The paradox of Pope Francis

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Pope Francis
Essay

Who could have imagined what has happened in the last weeks?

When I decided, months ago, to resign all of my official duties on the occasion of my 85th birthday, I assumed I would never see fulfilled my dream that -- after all the setbacks following the Second Vatican Council -- the Catholic church would once again experience the kind of rejuvenation that it did under Pope John XXIII.

Then my theological companion over so many decades, Joseph Ratzinger -- both of us are now 85 -- suddenly announced his resignation from the papal office effective at the end of February. And on March 19, St. Joseph?s feast day and my birthday, a new pope with the surprising and programmatic name Francis assumed this office.

Has Jorge Mario Bergoglio considered why no pope has dared to choose the name of Francis until now? At any rate, the Argentine was aware that with the name of Francis he was connecting himself with Francis of Assisi, the world-famous 13th-century downshifter who had been the fun-loving, worldly son of a rich textile merchant in Assisi, until at the age of 24, he gave up his family, wealth and career, even giving his splendid clothes back to his father.

It is astonishing how, from the first minute of his election, Pope Francis chose a new style: unlike his predecessor, no miter with gold and jewels, no ermine-trimmed cape, no made-to-measure red shoes and headwear, no magnificent throne.

Astonishing, too, that the new pope deliberately abstains from solemn gestures and high-flown rhetoric and speaks in the language of the people.

And finally it is astonishing how the new pope emphasizes his humanity: He asked for the prayers of the people before he gave them his blessing; settled his own hotel bill like anybody else; showed his friendliness to the cardinals in the coach, in their shared residence, at the official goodbye; washed the feet of young prisoners, including those of a young Muslim woman. A pope who demonstrates that he is a man with his feet on the ground.

All this would have pleased Francis of Assisi and is the opposite of what Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) represented in his time. In 1209, Francis and 11 ?lesser brothers? (*fratres minores* or friars minor) traveled to Rome to lay before Innocent their short rule, consisting entirely of quotations from the Bible, and to ask for papal approval for their way of life, living in poverty and preaching as lay preachers ?according to the form of the Holy Gospel.?

Innocent III, the duke of Segni, who was only 37 when he was elected pope, was a born ruler; he was a theologian educated in Paris, a shrewd lawyer, a clever speaker, a capable administrator and a sophisticated

diplomat. No pope before or after him had ever had as much power as he had. Innocent completed the revolution from above initiated by Gregory VII in the 11th century (?the Gregorian Reform?). Instead of the title of ?Successor of St. Peter,? Innocent preferred the title of ?Vicar of Christ,? as used by every bishop or priest until the 12th century. Unlike in the first millennium and never acknowledged in the apostolic churches of the East, the pope since then has acted as the absolute ruler, lawgiver and judge of Christianity -- until today.

The triumphal pontificate of Innocent proved itself to be not only the high point but also the turning point. Already in his time, there were signs of decay that, up until in our own time, have remained features of the Roman Curia system: nepotism, favoritism, acquisitiveness, corruption and dubious financial dealings. Already in the 1170s and 1180s, however, powerful nonconformist penitent and mendicant orders (Cathars, Waldensians) were developing. But popes and bishops acted against these dangerous currents by banning lay preaching, condemning ?heretics? by the Inquisition, and even carrying out the Albigensian Crusade.

Yet it was Innocent himself who tried to integrate into the church evangelical-apostolic mendicant orders, even during all the eradication policies against obstinate ?heretics? like the Cathars. Even Innocent knew that an urgent reform of the church was needed, and it was for this reform that he called the glorious Fourth Lateran Council. And so, after long admonition, he gave Francis of Assisi permission to preach. Concerning the ideal of absolute poverty as required by the Franciscan rule, the pope would first seek to know the will of God in prayer. On the basis of a dream in which a small, insignificant member of an order saved the papal Basilica of St. John Lateran from collapsing -- so it was told -- the pope finally allowed the Rule of Francis of Assisi. He let this be known in the Consistory of Cardinals but never had it committed to paper.

A different path

In fact, Francis of Assisi represented the alternative to the Roman system. What would have happened if Innocent and his like had taken the Gospel seriously? Even if they had understood it spiritually rather than literally, his evangelical demands meant and still mean an immense challenge to the centralized, legalized, politicized and clericalized system of power that had taken over the cause of Christ in Rome since the 11th century.

Innocent III was probably the only pope who, because of his unusual characteristics, could have directed the church along a completely different path, and this would have saved the papacies of the 14th and 15th centuries schism and exile, and the church in the 16th century the Protestant Reformation. Obviously, this would already have meant a paradigm shift for the Catholic church in the 13th century, a shift that instead of splitting the church would have renewed it, and at the same time reconciled the churches of East and West.

Thus, the early Christian basic concerns of Francis of Assisi remain even today questions for the Catholic church and now for a pope who, indicating his intentions, has called himself Francis. It is above all about the three basic concerns of the Franciscan ideal that have to be taken seriously today: It is about poverty, humility and simplicity. This probably explains why no previous pope has dared to take the name of Francis: The expectations seem to be too high.

That begs a second question: What does it mean for a pope today if he bravely takes the name of Francis? Of course the character of Francis of Assisi must not be idealized; he could be one-sided, eccentric, and he had his weaknesses, too. He is not the absolute standard. But his early Christian concerns must be taken seriously even if they need not be literally implemented but rather translated into modern times by pope and church.

- Poverty: The church in the spirit of Innocent III meant a church of wealth, pomp and circumstance, acquisitiveness and financial scandal. In contrast, a church in the spirit of Francis means a church of

transparent financial policies and modest frugality. A church that concerns itself above all with the poor, the weak and the marginalized. A church that does not pile up wealth and capital but instead actively fights poverty and offers its staff exemplary conditions of employment.

- Humility: The church in the spirit of Innocent means a church of power and domination, bureaucracy and discrimination, repression and Inquisition. In contrast, a church in the spirit of Francis means a church of humanity, dialogue, brotherhood and sisterhood, hospitality for nonconformists; it means the unpretentious service of its leaders and social solidarity, a community that does not exclude new religious forces and ideas from the church but rather allows them to flourish.
- Simplicity: The church in the spirit of Innocent means a church of dogmatic immovability, moralistic censure and legal hedging, a church of canon law regulating everything, a church of all-knowing scholastics and of fear. In contrast, a church in the spirit of Francis of Assisi means a church of good news and of joy, a theology based purely on the Gospel, a church that listens to people instead of indoctrinating from above, a church that does not only teach but one that constantly learns.

So, in the light of the concerns and approaches of Francis of Assisi, basic options and policies can be formulated today for a Catholic church whose façade still glitters on great Roman occasions but whose inner structure is rotten and fragile in the daily life of parishes in many lands, which is why many people have left it in spirit and often in fact.

While no reasonable person will expect that one man can effect all reforms overnight, a paradigm shift would be possible in five years: This was shown by the Lorraine Pope Leo IX (1049-54) who prepared Gregory VII?s reforms, and in the 20th century by the Italian John XXIII (1958-63) who called the Second Vatican Council. But, today above all, the direction should be made clear again: not a restoration to pre-council times as there was under the Polish and German popes, but instead considered, planned and well-communicated steps to reform along the lines of the Second Vatican Council.

A third question presents itself today as much as then: Will a reform of the church not meet with serious opposition? Doubtless, he will thus awaken powerful opposition, above all in the powerhouse of the Roman Curia, opposition that is difficult to withstand. Those in power in the Vatican are not likely to abandon the power that has been accumulated since the Middle Ages.

Curial pressures

Francis of Assisi also had to experience the force of such curial pressures. He who wanted to free himself of everything by living in poverty clung more and more closely to ?Holy Mother Church.? Not in confrontation with the hierarchy but rather in obedience to pope and Curia, he wanted to live in imitation of Jesus: in a life of poverty, in lay preaching. He and his followers even had themselves tonsured in order to enter the clerical state. In fact, this made preaching easier but on the other it encouraged the clericalization of the young community, which included more and more priests. So it is not surprising that the Franciscan community became increasingly integrated into the Roman system. Francis? last years were overshadowed by the tensions between the original ideals of Jesus? followers and the adaptation of his community to the existing type of monastic life.

To do Francis justice: On Oct. 3, 1226, aged only 44, he died as poor as he had lived. Just 10 years previously, one year after the Fourth Lateran Council, Innocent III died unexpectedly at the age of 56. On July 16, 1216, his body was found in the Cathedral of Perugia: This pope who had known how to increase the power, property and wealth of the Holy See like no other before him was found deserted by all, naked, robbed by his own servants. A trumpet call signaling the transition from papal world domination to papal powerlessness: At the beginning of the 13th century there is Innocent III reigning in glory; at the end of the century, there is the megalomaniac Boniface VIII (1294-1303) arrested by the French; and then the 70-year exile in Avignon, France, and the

Western schism with two and, finally, three popes.

Barely two decades after Francis? death, the Roman church seemed to almost completely domesticate the rapidly spreading Franciscan movement in Italy so that it quickly became a normal order at the service of papal politics, and even became a tool of the Inquisition. If it was possible for the Roman system to finally domesticate Francis of Assisi and his followers, then obviously it cannot be excluded that a Pope Francis could also be trapped in the Roman system that he is supposed to be reforming. Pope Francis: a paradox? Is it possible that a pope and a Francis, obviously opposites, can ever be reconciled? Only by an evangelically minded, reforming pope.

To conclude, a fourth question: What is to be done if our expectations of reform are quashed from above? In any case, the time is past when pope and bishops could reckon with the obedience of the faithful. The 11th-century Gregorian Reform also introduced a certain mysticism of obedience: Obeying God means obeying the church and that means obeying the pope. Since that time, it has been drummed into Catholics that the obedience of all Christians to the pope is a cardinal virtue; commanding and enforcing obedience -- by whatever means -- has become the Roman style. But the medieval equation, ?Obedience to God equals obedience to the church equals obedience to the pope,? patently contradicts the word of the apostle before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: ?Man must obey God rather than other men.?

We should then in no way fall into resignation; instead, faced with a lack of impulse toward reform from the top down, from the hierarchy, we must take the offensive, pushing for reform from the bottom up. If Pope Francis tackles reforms, he will find he has the wide approval of people far beyond the Catholic church. However, if he just lets things continue as they are, without clearing the logjam of reforms as now in the case of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, then the call of ?Time for outrage! *Indignez-vous*!? will ring out more and more in the Catholic church, provoking reforms from the bottom up that will be implemented without the approval of the hierarchy and frequently even in spite of the hierarchy?s attempts at circumvention. In the worst case -- as I already wrote before this papal election -- the Catholic church will experience a new ice age instead of a spring and run the risk of dwindling into a barely relevant large sect.

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